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ABSTRACT

Student instructional acitivity preferences and the apparent motives and substance underlying the preferences were analyzed. An 80-item classroom activity preference scale and a 12-item reaction to innovative instructional practices scale were administered to 746 new freshmen at Michigan State University. Responses to the 12-item innovative activity scale were obtained from 1,050 seniors in the spring of 1975 as part of a four-year followup study. Both freshmen and especially seniors appear highly positive toward most of the proposed innovations in academic practices. Students appear to favor innovations in general, but apparently not if the changes proposed appear impersonal, structured, prescriptive, or essentially task-centered. The activities checked by students as undesirable appear to indicate a rejection of serious study-type instructional tasks. Rejected activities seem to be largely those designed to produce systematic coverage of the basic course content and skills with grades and quizzes. The list of activities that students indicate as desirable appears to emphasize the personal element and is only remotely concerned with learning. The items instead appear to encompass activities that give students a feeling of immediate well-being, security or identity, and freedom from prescription, structure, or demands. Questions are raised about the use of student instructional preferences as a primary guide in instructional modification. (SW)

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STUDENT INSTRUCTIONAL PREFERENCES AND INSTRUCTIONAL MODIFICATION

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The past decade has experienced a growing concern in higher education for student views in institutional planning. And this concern has had a dramatic impact. Students have gained freedoms, options, input, and representation in non-academic living domains. Kellams (5) summarizes a variety of recent directions in the student drive for influence. Many of these same desires for freedom, option, and voice also appear to be influencing academic and instructional practices. The analysis of the implication of this extension of student influence into the academic arena is the major thrust of this paper.

Systematic attempts to utilize student views take a variety of forms. Most widely studied and implemented has been the use of student reactions to evaluate instructors and instruction. Usage has grown conspicuously in the past decade and the 1975 survey by Centra (2) shows over ninety percent of colleges surveyed indicating at least limited use of student reactions. The extensive review of the literature by Costin, Greenough, and Menges (3) shows average class ratings by students to be highly reliable and related to other indices of instructional effectiveness. Sheehan (8), however, points to possible sources of bias which should be considered in interpretation. Many instructional planners propose regular use of student evaluations as the basic on-going guide to altering instructional styles and practices. Recent growth of student developed, administered, and distributed forms have a new impact because of public circulation of results with instructors identified.

The humanistic orientation of non-traditional programs (open learning, cooperative education, campus free college, etc.) constituted another force for considering student views. Architects of these programs which were designed to serve a limited clientele developed an impressive case for use in these student-centered programs of innovations such as learning environments stressing unstructured learning, wide choice, field study, adaptations to individual learning styles, student involvement, etc. Disciples, however, have generated even greater rhetoric about general applicability of these student-centered programs and many of the practices are being increasingly applied to more conventional content-centered credentialing programs where the rationale is not as self-evident. While several balanced perspectives on values and role of non-traditional learning are beginning to appear (1,6), there is a problem in separating the rhetoric from the basic logic and evidence. Coupled with these and other student-centered programs has been the growing tendency to utilize student satisfaction as a prime validation criterion (4,7).

The purpose of the present study is to analyze student instructional activity preferences and to speculate about student motives and substance underlying the preferences. Instructional activity preferences of new freshmen and seniors will provide the basis for identifying class activities which students tend to approve or reject. The general character of these preferences provides a basis for speculating about the apparent substance of the student preferences.

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THE PROCEDURE

An 80 item classroom activity preference scale and a 12 item reaction to innovative instructional practices scale were administered to 746 new freshmen at Michigan State University. The surveys were administered the first week to a cross-section of classes taken by new freshmen in Fall term, 1975. They were typically distributed for completion outside of class hours and collected from the majority of students in subsequent class sessions. Responses to the 12 item innovative activity scale had been secured earlier as part of a four year followup reactionnaire from 1050 seniors in Spring term, 1975. This represented a 33 percent return from a mail survey distributed to 3200 fourth year students. While the samples of freshmen and seniors to whom questionnaires were distributed were representative of the two populations, both freshmen and senior respondents may be somewhat atypical because many failed to return completed surveys. Responses were anonymous in both surveys.

REACTIONS TO INNOVATIVE INSTRUCTIONAL PRACTICES

Seniors in spring term, 1975, and freshmen in Fall term were asked to react to 12 types of academic practices which were proposed as instructional innovations of the past decade. Instructions to students were as follows:

> A number of changes have occurred in higher education in the past ten years. How do you feel about the desirability of these changes?
>
> KEY: 1. Desirable - and more should be done
> 2. Good - as it is now
> 3. Undesirable - have already gone too far
> 4. No basis for giving a view

The relative percentage of students indicating response 1 - Desirable (D), or 3 - Undesirable (U) were considered indicative of students being especially positive or negative to the innovative practice. A Desirability Index (DI) consolidated the positive and negative percentage reactions into a single figure by subtracting the percentage indicating Undesirable from the percentage indicating Desirable for each practice. Student responses to the 12 innovations are reported below for freshmen and seniors as the DI index in addition to the actual percentage indicating desirable and undesirable (D-U). The DI Index is also presented by sex. Innovative practices are presented in order of the decreasing DI Index for seniors.

		All		Males	Females
No. of Seniors		1050		493	557
No. of Freshmen		746		353	393
		DI	D-U	DI	DI
1. Student involvement in evaluating faculty members	Seniors	77	79- 2	69	84
	Freshmen	41	46- 5	38	45
2. Field work outside of classroom being used as a complement to the regular class	Seniors	76	77- 1	73	78
	Freshmen	56	60- 4	45	61
3. Classes discussing more contemporary issues	Seniors	70	71- 1	64	75
	Freshmen	57	59- 2	54	60

		All		Males	Females
		DI	D-U	DI	DI
4. Students developing areas of concentration apart from one department (e.g., ecology, environmental or interdisciplinary programs)	Seniors	64	66- 2	58	69
	Freshmen	43	46- 3	36	49
5. Provision in class to pursue individual interests	Seniors	62	64- 2	59	67
	Freshmen	43	46- 3	39	48
6. Providing opportunities to do independent study for credit	Seniors	60	61- 1	58	61
	Freshmen	53	55- 2	50	56
7. Many classes, outside of specialized areas, considering general wide-spread issues (pollution, ecology, consumerism, etc.)	Seniors	59	62- 3	51	66
	Freshmen	45	49- 4	37	51
8. Student involvement in how classes are to be conducted	Seniors	42	48- 6	33	50
	Freshmen	33	38- 5	26	40
9. Reduction in the number of required courses and increase in number of electives permitted	Seniors	42	49- 7	35	48
	Freshmen	29	34- 5	28	30
10. Using individualized programmed learning such as autotutorial methods or programmed texts	Seniors	20	39-19	18	21
	Freshmen	5	25-20	7	4
11. Assigning grades on pass-no grade or credit-no credit basis	Seniors	8	30-22	-5	20
	Freshmen	2	25-23	-1	4
12. Using television as an instructional medium	Seniors	-33	11-44	-24	-40
	Freshmen	-13	19-32	-12	-15

Both freshmen and especially seniors appear highly positive toward most of the proposed innovations in academic practices. Only three of the 12 practices were indicated by 20 percent or more of the seniors or freshmen as undesirable while much larger percentages indicated the majority of innovative activities as desirable and ones in which more should be done. In fact, the majority of the seniors indicated desirable to over one-half of the innovations while only 1 or 2 percent indicated undesirable to innovations such as discussion of contemporary issues, field work, independent study, discussion of widespread popular issues, interdisciplinary programs, pursuit of individual interests, and evaluating the faculty.

Seniors tend to be even more supportive of the innovative practices than freshmen, and females tend to be generally more supportive than males. However, both groups tend to rank the desirability of 12 practices into very nearly the same rank order. Only one practice, "student involvement in evaluating faculty," differentiates freshmen markedly from seniors. Freshmen rank this activity as but 7th in desirability of the 12 innovative practices (DI of 41) but the DI Index for seniors (especially females) ranks the activity as highest in desirability with 79 percent of all seniors indicating the practice of evaluating faculty as desirable and only 2 percent indicating undesirable.

The generally positive reaction to the innovative practices can be a result of students feeling that activities such as these provide more substantive learning experiences. However, students instead may be influenced more by peripheral considerations such as being freed from the rigors of the typical classroom. The academic practices cited as innovative generally do provide students more freedom, less

structure, more options, and a break from classroom routine. Furthermore, in conventional programs, the alternative instructional practices favored by students are often used sparingly to stimulate student interest by providing breadth and a change of routine from the more substantive considerations covered in class.

The three activities which are low in desirability (DI Index of 20 or lower), namely, programmed learning, pass-fail grades, and instructional television suggest that factors other than novelty also influence academic preferences. Students appear to favor innovations in general, but apparently not if the changes proposed appear impersonal, structured, prescriptive, or essentially task centered. To secure more definitive data on this task versus freedom centered dimension a more detailed 80 item instructional activity preference scale was developed over the summer and administered to 744 new freshmen in fall, 1975. The scale was designed to assess dimensions such as freedom versus regulation, flexibility versus uniformity, acceptance versus standards, covert mental versus overt physical activity in class, etc. The items were intended to be non-evaluative descriptive statements. These items differ from those in most instructional reaction scales where students are asked to react to goals or directions which are phrased as ideals.

INSTRUCTIONAL ACTIVITY PREFERENCES

Instructions to students for responding to the instructional activities were as follows:

> Please indicate the degree to which you regard the following class activities as desirable or undesirable. Use the following key to evaluate each activity.*
>
> KEY: 1. Desirable
> 2. Neutral or no feeling either way
> 3. Not desirable

The relative percentage of freshmen indicating responses 1 (desirable) and 3 (not desirable) formed the basis for classifying activities on a scale of desirability for students. A desirability index (DI) was computed as before by subtracting the percentage indicating an activity as not desirable from the percentage indicating desirable.

The thrust of activities indicated by students as not desirable appeared to be consistent with the hypotheses of students generally rejecting activities which appear essentially task oriented. Likewise, activities considered desirable (DI Index of 40 or higher) appear generally to emphasize personal considerations. For this reason activities are classified under several task oriented categories for the undesirable activities and non-task oriented or personal dimensions for desirable activities.**

*A five point scale ranging from very desirable, desirable, neutral, not desirable, very undesirable was used but this was collapsed to a 3 point scale for purposes of analysis by consolidation of responses 1 and 2 as well as 4 and 5.

**Other classifications for the items could have been proposed. These, however, evolve from initial hypotheses proposed by the writer which guided the construction of the class activity scale. Furthermore, they are consistent with the general more personal and feeling oriented student perspective in the scale.

Class activities which students indicated as not desirable are the following (DI Index of 19 or lower). The DI (desirability index) is presented as well as the actual percentage of freshmen indicating the activity as desirable (D) and not desirable (N). All of the activities were prefaced with lead-in phrases such as the following: classes with; classes in which; a class in which the instructor [the student, grades], etc. Students appear not to desire activities which:

	DI	D	N
A. Are Impersonal and Systematic			
1. Well-organized TV presentations for large groups	11	41	30
2. Programmed lessons are studied in individual study	-10	26	36
3. Lessons presented and guided by computer terminals	-48	11	59
B. Are Structured and Task Oriented			
4. Sticks to the basic content and area	13	39	26
5. A set of established procedures which are followed in successive class sessions	7	37	30
6. Concentrated work on the fundamentals of the academic discipline	1	29	28
7. Is highly structured	-3	32	35
8. Many regular systematic lectures	-10	30	40
9. Spends time answering only the relevant questions in class	-14	32	46
10. Highly specified content which must be learned	-15	28	43
C. Are Demanding and Prescribed			
11. Grades are based on many assignments and tests	12	41	29
12. Regular written assignments on the basic course material	-5	30	35
13. Regular weekly quizzes	-5	29	34
14. Frequent deadlines which must be met	-27	23	50
15. Rigorously defined standards which student must satisfy	-38	20	58
D. Appear Threatening, Uncertain, Anxiety-Evoking			
16. Grades are based on comparing individual scores to class averages	-2	32	34
17. Grades are based on voluntary projects	-3	27	30
18. Student can do as much or as little as he/she wishes	-6	32	38
19. Grades are only "pass" or "fail"	-17	27	44
20. Grades are based upon how you compared to all others in the class	-27	24	51
21. Grades are based upon a "curve" which specified how many students get a certain grade; i.e., 15-25% get a 4.0, 0-5% get 0.0	-28	25	53
E. Have Students Under Surveillance, On Trial			
22. Grades range from barely passing to very superior (no failures)	17	44	27
23. Grades are based largely on class participation	2	36	34
24. Keeps regular attendance records	-7	26	33
F. Are Non-Material, Abstract			
25. The goal is to develop an educated person rather than employable skills	3	36	33
26. Basic theory is stressed, rather than immediate practical use	-25	20	45
G. Non-Classifiable			
27. Only relevant portions of original works (classic sources) with interpretations are considered	-6	29	35

These activities checked by students as undesirable appear to show a rejection of serious study-type instructional tasks. Rejected activities seem to be largely those designed to produce systematic coverage of the basic course content and skills with grades and quizzes for quality control add stimulation. As specified in the sub-categories, activities indicated as undesirable are those which appear to be impersonal, systematic, structured, task oriented, prescribed, demanding, and abstract or theoretical. Bases for grades of nearly any form appear to be rejected. Reasons proposed are that they appear to be threatening, anxiety-provoking, uncertain, and because they seem to have students on trial or under surveillance. These activities outwardly appear to minimize the human element in instruction, but nearly all of these activities have been proved to be efficient procedures for furthering substantive learning with group instruction.

Desirable class activities (DI Index of 40 or higher) constitute the following (again visualize the lead-in phrases such as classes in which the instructor, classes with, etc.). These are activities where students appear to desire:

	DI	D	N
A. Personal Identity and Respect			
1. Shows as much interest in students as in the material being taught	90	93	3
2. Student is treated with respect	88	91	3
3. Show a personal interest in students	87	89	2
4. Feels he/she is being treated like an informed adult	85	88	3
5. Knows the names of all the students in the class	66	70	4
6. The students' personal experiences are solicited and tied into class lectures and discussions	41	55	14
B. Freedom from Anxiety			
7. Feels secure and unthreatened	80	85	5
8. Permits extra work to improve a grade	77	82	5
9. Is told exactly what must be done to get certain grades	67	74	7
10. Knows he/she is going to pass if an effort is made	66	75	9
11. Grades are based upon achievements other than examinations	61	70	9
12. Concentrates on practical skills rather than on theory	46	58	12
13. Grades indicate whether students have mastered carefully specified objectives	43	55	12
14. Accepts excuses and explanations (as for a missed quiz)	42	56	14
C. Physical Activity and Action in Class			
15. Much discussion and interaction	81	85	4
16. Small group seminars	64	71	7
17. There is lots of activity going on	63	68	5
18. Free-wheeling discussions on current societal problems	60	69	9
D. Freedom From Routine-Structure-Prescription			
19. Time is allowed for student questions and viewpoints	88	91	3
20. Instructor demonstrates much familiarity with current issues and ideas	85	88	3
21. Is fun to attend	83	87	4
22. Encourages and answers all kinds of questions in class	71	79	8
23. Lectures spiced with really good humor and jokes	70	76	6

	DI	D	N
24. Current popular topics are often a substitute for regular class activities	52	67	15
25. Time is allowed for reports on student projects	43	54	11
26. Instructor points out weaknesses in society's institutions	43	53	10
E. Options and Choice			
27. Much freedom to pursue individual interests	75	80	5
28. The student has many options as to what he/she will do	63	71	8
29. Student decides what to do for major projects	52	61	9
F. Student Input and Influence			
30. New instructional approaches are tried out and changed because of student reaction and preferences	70	77	7
31. Flexibility in class activities, reflecting the mood of the class	69	77	8
32. Student has input into helping the instructor develop new teaching approaches	69	72	3
33. Student and his/her interests determine classroom activities	46	56	10
G. Excellence Rewarded Without Standards Specified			
34. Can really prove himself/herself and show what he/she knows	67	72	5
35. Grades are based on what each person knows regardless of how others do	62	72	9
36. Grades show whether you really knew the materials or "just got by"	58	66	8
37. Grades give recognition to those who do superior work	42	58	16
H. Attractive Appearing Goals - Not Activities (an error in phrasing)			
38. Instructor shows uniform fairness to everyone	92	94	2
39. The goal is to develop skills which make the student more employable	69	75	6
40. Is carefully planned and organized	68	76	8
41. Student has to work harder, but learns more	68	72	4
42. Instructor expects much from students and gets much done	49	62	13
I. Non-Classifiable			
43. Instructor sets the tasks to be mastered	59	67	8

This list of activities which students indicate as desirable appears to emphasize the personal element and is only remotely concerned with learning. The items instead appear to encompass activities and experiences which give students a feeling of immediate well-being, security or identity, and freedom from prescription, structure or demands. While a few of the activities outwardly appear to suggest a concern with learning, such as those classified under "Attractive Goals - Not Activities" (category H), these instead seem to be inadvertent goal-oriented statements expressing a desired end which few can reject as undesirable. Activities under category G (Excellence Rewarded Without Standards) could also be considered attractive goal statements, but they more specifically seem to endorse the ideal of academic excellence but without reference to evaluative processes which must be applied to give meaning to excellence.

Activities which were generally highest in desirability (high DI indices) are those which imply students securing personal identity and respect (category A) and those which suggest divergence from regular classroom regime (category D) as well as the related options and choice (category E). Students also are favorable towards procedures which appear to give them input and impact (category F). A few of the activities in categories B and C could possibly be considered to have a task or learning oriented perspective. Discussion, small seminars, specified objectives, practical skills, etc., have been proposed by advocates as fruitful means for achieving effective learning. But, as isolated examples in a complex of preferences which generally appear non-task oriented, it seems advisable to first consider non-substantive student motives for these activities as well, although this is clearly not the only possible interpretation.

DISCUSSION

The list of desired and rejected instructional activities presented certainly helps us understand the student perspective. We should be aware of the basic human concerns and desires students share. Awareness of these factors is especially imperative in voluntary non-required situtaions such as workshops and adult education classes. And even when the primary consideration in regular classes is maximal cultivation of fundamental knowledge, awareness of factors such as these can help us be more humane as well as effective in our instruction.

But, the apparent dominance of personal non-task considerations in desired student instructional preferences raises questions about their use as a primary guide in instructional modificacion. The preferences suggest students being influenced by immediate short-term concerns and desires rather than by concern for more substantive long-range educational benefits. These immediate concerns appear to include natural desires for personal identity, excitement, freedom, autonomy, options, and having influence in helping mold one's instructional setting.

Students, like all people, also wish to avoid anxiety and frustration. While most appreciate the need for systematic work, requirements, prescription, and evaluation, they are not necessarily attracted by, nor do they seek, stimulation and experiences such as these. Given the choice, nearly all would prefer to be accepted for what they are now rather than to have their efforts evaluated. Similarly, very few like to be told what to do if an alternative is to have options and choice. But this lack of student enthusiasm for factors such as these does not negate their value in promoting effective learning.

The results, in summary, suggest conspicuous limitations to direct use of studen instructional preferences. We should be aware of these possible biasing factors when interpreting student preferences and before making major instructional modifications based upon student preferences or reactions.